A FEARFUL DISTANCE FROM OUR BEGINNINGS
II Kings 23:1-3
July 1, 1979

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

In the year 621 BC Josiah, King of Judah, ordered some repairs for the Temple in Jerusalem. In the process the workmen who were carrying out the repairs discovered a dusty scroll which had been lost and forgotten for many years. That discovery precipitated a remarkable period of reform and national renewal which were vital in the long history of God's people. The nation had been born, centuries before, in a sequence of extraordinary events: the Exodus from Egypt, the long and tortuous wandering in the wilderness, the heroic conquest of the land. Those were the formative events. But by 621 all of that was very ancient history. Judah was middle-aged, sophisticated, settled, complacent.

The nation seemed to have lost its sense of purpose. Political divisions were fracturing national unity and the original intense commitment to God and His will had been replaced by a tolerant, casual religiosity. By 621 Judah had made peace with and even adopted some of the Canaanite religious and social customs. Pagan idols appeared in the Temple. Cult prostitution, a favorite practice of Canaanite religion, was flourishing.

Then the lost scroll was discovered. Archeologists tell us that the document those workers found in the wall of the Temple was actually what we know as the Book of Deuteronomy. When it was read to King Josiah he was so upset that he rent his clothes. He sent the scroll to a Prophetess who confirmed his suspicion that in light of the content of this document the nation was in trouble indeed. And then the King did a dramatic and remarkable thing. He invited all the dignitaries and leaders of the nation to Jerusalem - to the Temple - a most impressive gathering: but it wasn't a Garden Party. The King took a position standing beside one of the pillars of the Temple and then he read - in its entirety the Book of Deuteronomy to that assembly. As a concluding gesture he bound himself, and the nation with him, to God in a new covenant based on the ancient words of the scroll.

What followed is known as the Deuteronomic Reform. The idols were removed from the Temple and burned. The pagan priests were fired and the sacred prostitutes run out of town. Beginning in Jerusalem and spreading throughout the whole nation a new spirit was generated. The law was renewed and obeyed again. The long forgotten virility of the nation - the people of the Exodus and wilderness and conquest - was recovered. Scholars credit the reform with a "renewed nation, a new moral conscience, and a new unity among the people". (H.T.Kerr, Theology Today, 10/75,p.219ff).

In the year of our Bicentennial, Hannah Arendt - one of our most articulate scholars, observed that most Americans were aware of the "Fearful distance we have come from our extraordinary beginning". King Josiah would have agreed with that sentiment. His reform movement renewed the nation by reducing the distance from its founding principles. Not a bad suggestion, I thought, as we approach the fourth of July, the celebration of our birth as a nation.

We, too, have come a fearful distance. In fact, some astute observers suggest that we have come so far that we are separated entirely from our revolutionary beginnings. Like Judah in 621 we are middle-aged, settled, complacent, lazy. Bruce Catton disturbs me by suggesting that the American Revolution may be observed best today in other lands, where people still struggle to be free, free from hunger, want, disease and political repression. I am disturbed when Catton chides us, as

he did several years ago, for pretending not to understand the revolutionary ferment which keeps boiling to the surface in Africa, and South America and Asia. I am disturbed when Arnold Toynbee writes, as he did several years ago, "The American Revolution has gone thundering on. Nothing can stop it, no, not even the American hands that first set it rolling. But during these last years, your revolution has gone on without you. The leadership has fallen into other hands. These non-Americans could never have seized the leadership of your revolution if you had not dropped it." (See John Mulder, Theology Today, 7/76, p.146).

Perhaps, then, we have much to learn from the story of Josiah and the Deuteronomic Reform. As is usually the case, the Bible turns out to be clearly and painfully contemporary! Perhaps this nation needs nothing so much as to reach back into its own past to reclaim its own formative events and ideas. Perhaps President Carter could do nothing better than call a convention of American dignitaries - educators, congressmen, business leaders, and read to them the Declaration of Independence. In 1787 Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, a Philadelphia physician and a Presbyterian, wrote: "The American war is over. But this is far from being the case with the American Revolution. On the contrary, nothing but the first act of the great drama is closed..."

As we think about that - not simply the war, but the revolution in the hearts and minds of the colonists, there is one dimension in particular that emerges as central to the whole project. It is the idea of a covenant, the same idea which played such an important part in the Deuteronomic Reform under King Josiah.

All viable societies are held together by a covenant, some commonly accepted sense of morality, which in turn is based on a commonly accepted view of the universe. The early Americans were motivated apparently by this commonly accepted idea of virtue: that liberty, justice, kindness, chastity, consideration - were ethical values to be admired and cultivated. They believed that those values were, in fact, reflective of God's will. They believed, in addition, that what they were doing was a reflection of His will for His creation. They dared to believe that God wants all people to be free, just, kind, chaste and considerate. At the outset, then, America was bound together by a covenant, by a deep and abiding sense of obligation to God or a higher order: and laterally - people to people, bound together for the common good.

That, I believe, is what we have lost. That lost covenant defines for me the fearful distance we have come. You have heard, no doubt, by now that we are called the "Me Generation": that the 1960's and 70's gave birth to a degree of self-centeredness unequalled in American history. Listen to Robert Bellah, University of California sociologist, "By now the decline of belief in all forms of obligation has been statistically documented: to one's occupation, one's family, one's country. A tendency to rank personal gratification above obligation to others correlates with a deepening cynicism about the established social, economic and political institutions of society." (Preface, The Broken Covenant).

Alexis de Tocqueville, a Frenchman who was fascinated by the experiment in Republican Democracy, thought he saw two distinct motifs in the emerging nation: a religious motif which emphasized obligation to God and one's neighbors; and, second, individualism which emphasized self-interest. He warned, a century and a half ago, that if self-interest ever replaced the sense of obligation, and if it ever combined with economics, our most noble institutions would be destroyed. Bellah believes de Tocqueville's worst fears have been realized. It took me a year and a half to

discover what made me so uncomfortable about William Simon's provocative and articulate best seller, Time For Truth. De Tocqueville put words around my feelings. Simon has made a god out of self-interest. He, and others have said it so much and so well - that self-interest, individual rights, personal preogatives, are what freedom means, that we have forgotten how to say "no": that that is a relatively new idea, and not a good one. When the covenant, the sense of obligation to one's neighbors and to the welfare of the country is replaced by the concern for personal well-being, personal safety, personal profit - it may sound like true-blue Americanism - but it isn't. It's new. And it's wrong. And it's why we are offended at the very suggestion that our personal comfort and convenience might have to be altered a bit, in the interest of national welfare. The people who established this country wouldn't have been offended - it's what they intended!

The Covenant Ethic of early America was based on the idea of obligation to others, and the idea of restraint and limitation - words we don't even know how to use anymore. The Time Magazine Essay several weeks ago looked at the energy crisis and quoted Brandeis scholar Marshall Sklane, "Several generations of us have been spoiled crazy. Having the highest standard of living in the world has made us vulnerable. In times of crisis, reactions are almost childlike. People want their candy. The need to modify lives evokes anger." (Time, 6/14/79). Provocative words, I thought, in light of local reactions to the suggestion that we not cool our restaurants below 80 degrees, or that we conserve resources and energy by re-using our beer bottles rather than discarding them. We have come a fearful distance.

The Ethic of the American Revolution taught restraint and suggested that the good life was not necessarily the life of indulgence. We have come a fearful distance: so far in fact that the person who even suggests sexual restraint as a viable ethical position for young people is hooted down as hopelessly out of date and irrelevant. Paul Ramsey, well known Ethicist at Princeton University, suggests that the culture is not even neutral on the subject, but actually pushes sexual activity on the young. He writes: "Such is the 'public service' announcement on TV, showing in shadowy outline a young man and woman walking together against a background of a pleasant evening (rather like ads for Salems or Kools - or 'Marlboro Country') while a sonorous voice says, 'Anyone can get V.D.; anyone can be cured.'" Ramsey comments, "In that setting the first statement is seduction,...the second is palpable falsehood: with every cure by antibiotics the strains of gonorrhea grow more resistant. Has anyone recommended chastity lately?" (Theology Today, 4/79, p.11). As a parent, I wouldn't mind at all if someone would tell my children, in addition to how to understand, procure and use birth control devices, and where to get an abortion (information I want them to have), that it is not absolutely necessary for them to have sexual intercourse before they know how to spell it. We have come a long way. We have put a lot of distance between ourselves and our extraordinary covenant.with its venerable ideas of obligation and restraint and limitation.

Christians have no monopoly on morality, nor do we have a patented political system to offer the world. But we should be worldly wise by now. Our Lord, after all, was executed by a governmental bureaucracy which had strayed a very long way from its beginnings. And we do have a Lord who saves us from the confining prison house of self-centeredness and teaches us that real life is life lived for others.

Sargent Shriver delivered an address in Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago recently in which he cited C.S.Lewis' description of hell as that state of existence when each person withdraws farther and farther from every other person,

indulging, more and more in the particular individual vice, the particular negation which he or she had chosen in preference to union with God. Shriver observed, "Each one's self-centered existence, each one's loneliness and distance from God, and from fellow human beings increases, until every such person becomes like a black hole in space where the density of despair equals the distance from God. Infinite density, infinite distance, infinite despair. That's hell." (Criterion, University of Chicago Divinity School, Winter 1979, p.30).

That, it seems to me, is what the Christian faith has to say to a selfish and indulgent culture. Not a warning about a torturous firey hell after death. But the hell of life lived solely for self, right here in the present. The hell life becomes when it is simply the slavery to selfishness. That is the strong word of Jesus Christ. And it is a word, I would respectfully submit, the American Republican needs in this year of our Lord 1979. We need to catch up again with our own revolution. We need to renew an ancient covenant and bind ourselves again to the good of the whole community and nation.

In 1630 a ship stood in the harbor beside what was to become the Massachusetts Bay Colony. John Winthrop, leader of the colony, preached a sermon to those intrepid souls before they landed. It is a precious document - not only for its historic value, but for the timeless truth of what was said that day -

The preacher first told those English men and women that God had brought them to the shores of the new world for a purpose, and that their success depended on their being faithful to a new covenant with God and with one another. He warned them that the alternative was disaster and then he said words which sum up beautifully my hope and prayer for my nation and community:

"Now the onely way to avoyde this shipwracke and to provide for our posterity is to followe the Counsell of Micah, to doe Justly, to love mercy, to walke humbly with our God. For this end, wee must be knitt together in this worke as one man, wee must entertaine each other in brotherly Affeccion, wee must be willing to abridge our selves of our superfluities, for the supply of others necessities, wee must uphold a familiar Commerce together in all meeknes, gentlenes, patience and liberallity, wee must delight in each other, make others Condicions our owne, rejoyce together, mourne together, labour and suffer together...soe shall wee keepe the unitie of the spirit in the bond of peace, the Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us as his owne people and will commaund a blessing upon us in all our wayes, soe that wee shall see much more of his wisdome, power, goodnes and truthe than formerly wee have beene acquainted with. Wee shall finde that the God of Israell is among us, when tenn of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies, when hee shall make us a prayse and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantacions: the Lord make it like that of New England." (Bellah, op.cit. p.14-15). That is our hope - a new covenant with God - and with one another. We have come a long way - but not too far. May God bless us - and our nation. Amen.

Our father's God to Thee, Author of Liberty,
To Thee we sing:
Long may our land be bright, With Freedom's Holy Light
Protect us by thy might
Great God our King. Amen.